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Research article

Knowledge Diplomacy as an instrument of South Korea's foreign policy: theoretical aspects and practical implementation in the case of KOICA Scholarship Program

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Abstract. The relevance of this study derives from the limited understanding of the mechanisms of public diplomacy that are activated when scholarship programs for international students are conducted by East Asian countries, particularly South Korea. Moreover, the relevance of the topic is also determined by the scarcity of research on the role of knowledge in public diplomacy mechanisms. The author of this article analyzes South Korea's international student exchange scholarship program, the KOICA Scholarship Program. This case study analyzes the contents of official documents adopted by the Government of the Republic of Korea, documents and materials published by subordinate organizations that administer scholarship programs for international students, as well as scholarly papers on the topic of knowledge diplomacy and related topics. The novelty element is that the concept of knowledge diplomacy, which is gaining popularity worldwide almost has not been used in the Russophone academia, and the studies on South Korean exchange programs as public diplomacy instruments are also poorly represented. The analysis of official documents has shown that the concept of knowledge in the official Korean interpretation differs from the existing academic interpretations accepted in the West (e.g., Great Britain, the United States). Also, the analysis of the scholarship program showed that it only partly complies with the knowledge diplomacy goals assigned by the Government. In particular, through this scholarship Korea successfully transmits knowledge about Korean history and culture, as well as professional knowledge, while the field of knowledge exchange in the program remains unattained. The author concludes with several practical recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of the scholarship program as a tool for knowledge diplomacy.

Keywords: public diplomacy, knowledge diplomacy, South Korea, international students, KOICA, student exchange, soft power, Korean studies, knowledge sharing.

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Introduction

South Korea is one of the most active actors in terms of internationalizing higher education and attracting foreign students in Asia. According to the government's plan, the number of foreign students in Korea is set to reach 200,000 by 2023¹. The Korean government operates a number of scholarship programs, which, among other things, are set to perform certain public diplomacy functions, such as promoting the country's image and helping Korea's economic advancement abroad, forming pro-Korean-minded unofficial "ambassadors" from students [Byun & Kim 2011].

Today, scholarship programs are actively used by many countries around the world as public diplomacy tools. Most of the research in public diplomacy concentrates on scholarship programs offered by Western countries, such as the American Fulbright Program [Bettie, 2019; Snow 2008]. At the same time, many researchers agree that the exchange of foreign students as a foreign policy tool remains understudied [McConachie 2019; Snow 2008; Fominykh, 2020; Mchedlova, 2020], with the role of knowledge in this context being barely considered.

At the same time, it should be noted that the concept of knowledge diplomacy (KD) itself is quite new [Knight 2019], and its practical use remains barely studied and rare, with few exceptions both in English [Asada 2019], and in Korean [Kim 2015] and Russian [Antyukhova 2018] academia. Thus, this research is relevant not only in terms of studying Korean foreign policy, but also in understanding the mechanisms of public diplomacy in general, activated through scholarship programs for foreign students, as well as for understanding the role of knowledge in these mechanisms.

There are several studies analyzing the efficiency of the Korean Government Scholarship Program – Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) as an instrument of Korean public diplomacy. In particular, recent studies have shown that the country's image, formed through the scholarship program in Korea, has a statistically significant impact on maintaining personal and professional relations between program alumni and South Koreans [Varpahovskis & Ayhan 2020], as well as spreading positive and negative information about the country [Ayhan & Gouda 2021].

At the same time, the potential of the second key scholarship program from the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA SP) has not yet been researched in the context of public diplomacy [Park 2020].

¹ Jung W.-G. South Korea – Future Hub of International Education? Center for Strategic and International Studies. September 30, 2020. URL: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/south-korea-%E2%80%93-future-hub-international-education> (accessed: 20.11.2020)

Moreover, neither the GKS program nor the KOICA SP were reviewed through the prism of the concept of KD, despite the fact that this concept is officially adopted by the Korean Government [MOFA 2019].

This work consists of seven key parts: the introduction is followed by the description of the methodology. The third part presents the theoretical aspects of the concept of KD. The fourth part talks about how the official interpretation of KD in Korea is formulated. The fifth part describes Korea's KOICA SP scholarship program. Afterward, the use of KD under this program is analyzed. The concluding part provides recommendations aimed at improving the efficiency of the scholarship program as a tool of public diplomacy.

Methodology

This research analyzes the content of official documents approved by the Government of Korea, documents and materials published by organizations subordinate to the Government of Korea that conduct scholarship programs for international students, as well as research papers on KD and related topics. Analyzing these materials allows understanding the conceptual and practical features of the interpretation and use of the concept of KD. In addition, the analysis of the KOICA SP through the prism of the concept of KD allows determining the practical mechanisms of the concept, as well as highlighting aspects in which the scholarship programs, as tools of KD, can operate more effectively.

Knowledge diplomacy in theory

Knowledge diplomacy (KD) is a new concept that, despite the lack of a well-established definition, has been used by both scientist experts and politicians for over twenty years [Ryan 1998]. Today there are several interpretations for the term “knowledge diplomacy”.

In his book of 1998 M.P. Ryan defines KD through countries' policies related to the protection and enforcement of laws protecting intellectual property, in particular, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). At the same time, the author uses the word "diplomacy" in the context of political maneuvers between states that are trying to promote their intellectual products, including cultural, economic and technological innovations, as well as products in the sphere of entertainment [Ryan 1998].

Ogunnubi O. and The Shawa L.B. refer to the concept of KD as they analyze the foreign policy strategy of the Republic of South Africa (RSA).

Researchers associate it with the South African practice of using higher education as a soft power tool, which should allow South Africa to increase its geopolitical influence at the regional and international levels [Ogunnubi & Shawa 2017].

J. Knight, who is one of the main theorists of KD, emphasizes that this concept should be researched outside of the soft power paradigm, since soft power implies the priority of national interests of states over global, universal interests². J. Knight sees KD within the concept of cooperative public diplomacy, previously discussed by Leonardo and colleagues [Leonard, Stead & Smewing 2002], rather than through one country's ambition to dominate another in the field of higher education and technology. In addition, J. Knight does not consider the KD as an instrument of soft, non-violent coercion.

J. Knight also notes that there are differences between KD and other related concepts. In particular, KD differs from cultural diplomacy as it includes concepts like research and innovation. KD is not synonymous with science diplomacy, since science diplomacy usually focuses on innovation and research in technical and natural sciences, excluding social sciences and humanities. According to J. Knight, education diplomacy intersects with KD, but there are differences in goals, motives and driving forces between these two. Education diplomacy pursues the goal of human development, while KD focuses on the solution to social problems faced by countries around the world [Knight 2019].

One of the leading South Korean experts in public diplomacy, T. Kim, guided by a more pragmatic approach to improving the efficiency of South Korean public diplomacy, defined KD as a subcategory of the state's public diplomacy. Public diplomacy should use state policy, institutions, values formulated and accumulated in the process of the country's historical development as sources of soft power. This information and knowledge can be useful and interesting to countries that want to learn from the Korean experience to develop their own countries [Kim 2012].

Thus, there is no universally accepted definition of KD. In this study, the author summarizes the existing variants of definitions, while not recognizing any of the existing interpretations as unconditionally correct. Analyzing a practical case, the author adheres to the opinion of T. Kim that KD can be carried out within the framework of national interests and can be promoted

² Knight, J. The limits of soft power in higher education. University World News. 2014. URL: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20140129134636725> (accessed:: 20.11.2020)

by state actors [Kim 2012]. At the same time, the author agrees with J. Knight's opinion that the main feature of KD, which distinguishes it from other subcategories of public diplomacy, is the role of knowledge [Knight 2019]. It is necessary to emphasize the often-overlooked aspect of the interpretation that cooperation between state and non-state actors should be built around such processes as knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer, knowledge acquisition, and knowledge formation. The author believes that the actors involved in KD can pursue both national, as well as private, corporate and universal goals. These goals can be interconnected and are not mutually exclusive. At the same time, the author agrees with J. Knight on the importance of the aspect that interaction within the framework of KD should take place by mutual consent, and not by coercion [Knight 2019].

Knowledge Diplomacy in Korean Interpretation

Today, public diplomacy is one of the key instruments of South Korean foreign policy. Until 2016, Korea used public diplomacy, but it was not formally regulated and defined. In 2016, the Government of the Republic of Korea adopted the Public Diplomacy Act, which defines the further development and functions of public diplomacy as a foreign policy instrument of South Korea. Public diplomacy in this Act is defined as the diplomatic activity of the State, or in cooperation with local authorities or the private sector, through which the State enhances the understanding and confidence of foreign citizens in the Republic of Korea through culture, knowledge, politics, etc.³

This Act is also important because it defines the planning and implementation of public diplomacy. In particular, the Act obliges the executive authorities to draw up a 5-year general plan and conduct public diplomacy within the framework of this plan. It is this plan that introduces the concept of KD (Kor. 지식공공외교/지식외교)⁴.

Knowledge Diplomacy Activity Vectors

According to Korea's general plan of public diplomacy, KD has five main vectors of activity:

³ The Government of the Republic of Korea. Public Diplomacy Act. 2016. A non-official translation by the author.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. 2017-2021. Five-year general plan for public diplomacy. URL: https://www.prism.go.kr/homepage/entire/retrieveEntireDetail.do;jsessionid=ED479863F208866962A662ACF0405E90.node02?cond_research_name=&cond_research_start_date=&cond_research_end_date=&research_id=1262000-201700009&pageIndex=295&leftMenuLevel=160 (accessed: 20.11.2020)

1) Promoting interactive and cooperative KD using Korean knowledge in science, technology, humanities, history, tradition and development.

2) Building a global knowledge community (Korean 지식 공동체) by expanding and organizing events aimed at knowledge exchange between Koreans and foreigners.

3) Promoting research projects in Korean studies and active knowledge exchange, including Korean humanities, as well as promoting building a global knowledge community.

4) Supporting a new generation of experts in Korean studies by expanding scholarship programs, as well as strengthening the financial stability of research projects using private sponsorship.

5) Applying a specialized approach to each country and region.

Also, according to this document, KD should be applied to three groups of people: 1) foreign journalists, teachers, scientists and other opinion leaders, 2) researchers and students interested in studying Korea, 3) foreign citizens living in Korea and abroad. The policy towards these groups should help them to correctly understand Korean history, culture and values, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and educate a new generation of scholars in Korean studies who will form social and business networks friendly to Korea around them.

Even though the authors of the plan put KD within the frameworks of public diplomacy, there is no definition of KD in the general plan. At the same time, as far as we can see from the vectors of activity, knowledge in this plan is used in at least three contexts:

1) Knowledge about Korea. In this aspect, the state is concerned about conveying the image of Korea, as well as related aspects like history, culture, traditions, and values to the foreign public in a correct manner. The state wants to avoid misconceptions among the foreign public.

2) Knowledge as an asset. In this case, knowledge and experience in technology, economic development, humanities and other areas are assets that Korea can use when interacting with countries that are interested in South Korean experience and knowledge. Using knowledge as an asset, Korea can simultaneously create and maintain its own image of an expert in a particular field, which is extremely important when conducting niche diplomacy, and can also use its knowledge to help other countries develop.

3) Knowledge as a sphere of interaction. In the context of knowledge exchange with other countries, Korea may not act as a mentor or elder brother, but rather as a partner. Knowledge and technology exchange is an important context for diplomatic engagement with leading countries in various fields.

Korean International Cooperation Agency Scholarship Program (KOICA Scholarship Program)

Student exchange programs are a key tool of KD. Today, Korea has several programs that put KD into practice. One of the key programs is the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) Scholarship Program – KOICA SP.

Within this program, about 400 people a year come to Korea to pursue the academic master's and doctoral degrees (Ph.D). The program is aimed only at representatives of countries – recipients of aid from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Since its foundation in 1997, more than 4,000 students from more than 80 countries have been educated under this program.

This scholarship program was launched on the eve of Korea's transition from the rank of an OECD recipient country to the category of donor countries (1996). Korea's rapid development in less than 50 years, as well as the fact that Korea was the first developing country to shift from recipient status to donor status within the OECD are key elements of Korean national branding among developing countries. The government emphasizes Korea's unique historical development experience and notes that Korea has unique knowledge that it is ready to pass on to developing countries.

The official goal of KOICA SP is to educate key leaders from developing countries who can contribute to social and economic development in their home countries. At the same time, to participate in the program, the student's application must include a recommendation from a state body of his own country, and the student must have at least two years of work experience in the field in which he plans to obtain an academic degree. Moreover, the fellow must either be a public sector employee or work in a research institute in his home country. The range of educational programs that scholars can study is limited and includes such areas as economics, education, trade, rural development, public administration and others, but they should be aimed at socio-economic development⁵.

Under the terms of this program, foreign students have education, accommodation, medical insurance, flights fully funded, as well as receive a monthly scholarship. Students gain basic knowledge of the Korean language during the course of the main program. Moreover, the program is taught in

⁵ KOICA Scholarship Program. Capacity Improvement and Advancement for Tomorrow. URL: www.koica.go.kr (accessed: 20.11.2020)

English. There are currently 21 specially selected universities participating in this program, although the number of participating universities may vary from year to year [Park 2020].

KOICA SP through the prism of Knowledge Diplomacy

Country image, development and business

Analyzing KOICA SP in the context of the 5-year general plan of public diplomacy, it is worth noting that the program is aimed at representatives of developing countries and countries with transition economies⁶. Representatives of developing economies are not eligible for KOICA SP.

This approach is consistent with the goal of creating a global knowledge community, since students, having received a high-quality modern higher education in Korea, are included in the world scientific and professional communities, which pursue the goal of solving modern problems of state development.

Moreover, this focus on representatives from developing countries is in line with Korea's global goal of establishing itself as a leader in terms of development. Aid to developing countries is one of the channels of niche diplomacy, which includes establishing Korea's image and status of a "middle power" [Ayhan 2019].

One of the key channels in conducting development diplomacy is the provision of official development assistance (ODA). By funding tuition and related expenses, Korea provides funds to developing countries. It should be noted, however, that these investments perform at least three functions.

Firstly, Korea is committed to fulfilling the OECD donor country's commitments to provide 0.3% of gross national income (GNI) in aid to recipient countries. Reaching 0.25% of GNI by 2015 failed, but Korea updated the target and committed to hit 0.3% of GNI by 2030⁷. Failure to meet these goals may negatively affect the national image of Korea, while fulfilling promises and active assistance to developing countries, on the contrary, can improve the image of the country and companies affiliated with the country in the eyes of the local population [Varpahovskis 2020a]. Thus,

⁶ Classification defined by the United Nations in the report «World Economic Situation and Prospects». URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2020_Annex.pdf (accessed: 20.11.2020)

⁷ OECD (2018), Development Co-operation Report 2018: Joining Forces to Leave No One Behind, OECD Publishing, Paris. URL: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/dcr-2018-35-en.pdf?expires=1605855016&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=34075DAD058ED9B61C25C29AD593D096> (accessed: 20.11.2020)

South Korean ODA policy is an integral component of public diplomacy, which aims to improve the Korean image abroad.

Secondly, the provision of ODA through educational programs improves the professional and academic skills of representatives from developing countries. Afterward, it is assumed that this knowledge and skills will be applied in practice, for example, in high-tech production in the public and private sectors, as well as in the implementation of domestic socio-economic policies. Moreover, through ODA-funded education, Korea is raising new teachers who will distribute the knowledge gained in Korea in their home countries, working in educational institutions. Thus, Korea improves the country's image in the eyes of the international community and specific countries and contributes to the implementation of the sustainable development goals set by the United Nations⁸.

Thirdly, Korea pursues national interests in promoting the Korean economy in the world through ODA. For instance, infrastructure projects sponsored and promoted by ODA are carried out, among other things, by South Korean companies either individually or within the framework of multinational consortia. Through ODA, and KOICA, in particular, projects are sponsored and implemented in the areas of public administration (digitalization of administration systems), health care, trade, agriculture, energy, etc. A significant number of these projects are carried out by Korean companies. With the help of educational programs, Korea trains not only technical and managerial personnel at the enterprise, but also civil servants who, using their knowledge, should contribute to the successful implementation of projects while working in government bodies, such as relevant ministries [Varpahovskis 2020a].

Representing Korea correctly

The Korean government, in the Public Diplomacy Act and the 5-year general plan, repeatedly emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the foreign public receives correct information about Korea and that the correct impression of Korea is formed. The concern of providing information for correct understanding of Korea stems from the fact that Korea is highly dependent on foreign trade, therefore a positive perception and knowledge of Korea affects trust and economic relations between countries.

The KOICA SP partly performs an educating function regarding information about Korea. In addition to academic disciplines, the program

⁸ United Nations. The 17 Goals. URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/> (accessed: 20.11.2020)

includes teaching of the Korean language and culture. Thus, during their stay in Korea, foreign students learn South Korean culture, history and values. And even when studying professional academic disciplines, students get acquainted with South Korean development experience, gaining unique knowledge. It is worth mentioning that during their stay in Korea foreign students can broadcast this knowledge to compatriots and the international audience, and can also share their impressions of the country and their own experience [Ayhan & Gouda 2021].

However, research suggests that the assumption that being in a country as an exchange student creates a more positive image of the country may not be true [Wilson 2014]. Thus, alumni of another key scholarship program, GKS, noted that staying in Korea did not improve their experience and opinion of the country, but rather complicated their understanding of the country, as they were exposed to socio-cultural peculiarities (for example, culture of recycling, hierarchy) [Varpahovskis 2019]. Researchers from Russia came to similar conclusions when analyzing the perception of the country among foreign students [Kazarinova & Taisheva 2019].

Knowledge as a sphere of interaction

Despite the fact that the 5-year plan sets the goal of knowledge exchange, KOICA SP does not solve the problem of exchanging knowledge with foreign students and states – the program is designed in a way that Korea shares its knowledge, and foreign students can share their knowledge, experience and culture in a limited and non-systematized format. On the one hand, this task can be solved through other educational programs aimed at exchanging knowledge with already working scientists and academics or by sending South Korean citizens to universities in partner countries. On the other hand, there is the potential for knowledge exchange to be addressed within the KOICA SP as well.

Practical recommendations for the development of the program

The analysis of KOICA SP through the prism of the concept of KD allows us to note that, in general, it performs some functions of KD in the interpretation of the public diplomacy presented in the general plan. In particular, it forms a deeper and more correct understanding of South Korean culture, history, values, while also creating a new generation of experts versed in Korea ready to promote South Korean advancement in the world.

On the other hand, the analysis also shows that there is some unrealized potential that would allow the use of knowledge to address all three issues equally well. In other words, foreign students could become a source of knowledge for Korea, and thus knowledge exchange would take place, rather than a one-sided absorption of knowledge by foreign students.

In particular, the KOICA SP leadership may include, as one of the program components, student-led seminars and lectures that would talk about their foreign students' countries and countries' specifics to representatives of the South Korean public, including representatives of corporations that conduct economic activities abroad. Today, this activity is carried out only partially, outside the framework of scholarship programs⁹.

Another issue that is also highlighted by the creators of the general plan is the uncertainty about the efficiency of the programs. There is a perception that student exchanges have a positive effect on relations between countries, but often this is just an assumption based on unique cases, and cases of inefficiency are often omitted [Wilson 2014]. Another problem in measuring student exchange efficiency is that research organizations focus on short-term and easily measurable results, such as whether the exchange student's attitude towards the country of residence has changed [Banks 2011].

The appeal for more detailed and long-term studies of program effectiveness is compounded by recent studies that have shown that the country image that GKS alumni have gained as a result of their stay in the country has a statistically significant but limited impact on their behavior in maintaining private and professional contacts with South Korea [Varpahovskis & Ayhan 2020]. Moreover, the professional skills and knowledge that GKS students acquired in Korea are very often not used after the program [Varpahovskis 2020b]. There is no publicly available research on the efficiency of KOICA as a tool of public diplomacy, although this program performs the functions of both knowledge diplomacy and public diplomacy in general.

This study also showed that KD is still a developing concept, and in addition to the fact that there is an analysis of differences with the concepts of education diplomacy, scientific diplomacy and cultural diplomacy [Knight 2019], there are also alternative interpretations, as, for example, in the 5-year general plan for Korean public diplomacy, which are used in practice and are

⁹ ESLROK. UNESCO Global Peace Village. URL: <https://www.eslrok.com/en/teach-in-korea/standard-single-jobs/ad/unesco-global-peace-village,8921>; ECDKED. Special online course for South Koreans on how to do business in Uzbekistan. URL: <https://www.eckedu.com/eck/?c=423/1213/1221&uid=979&cat=23> (accessed: 20.11.2020)

likely to develop. The analysis also showed that KD is applied in practice within the frameworks of the national interests of the state, which are connected with universal goals, as well as personal and corporate goals. Thus, further research is necessary on the development of this concept and the determination of its boundaries in relation to cultural diplomacy, education diplomacy and scientific diplomacy, as well as the field of its practical application.

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